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ABSTRACT

A study examined mothers' employment situation as an important aspect of daily life that may influence day-to-day changes in parent-child interactions. Thirty-five mother-child dyads, recruited through four work site-based child care centers, were studied for 5 consecutive days. Target children were preschoolers enrolled full-time in the child care program. The typical mother in this study was an ethnic-minority single parent. At the end of each day at work, before being reunited with their children, mothers completed subjective measures of two daily job stressors: workload and negative interactions with co-workers and supervisors. At the end of the day they completed two scales describing interactions with the target child that took place after work: adversive interaction and maternal withdrawal. In addition, the 13 dyads at one of the sites were videotaped during 10-minute free-play periods at the parent child reunion each evening. Multiple regression analyses found support of two hypotheses: (1) that daily increases in perceived workload were associated with a same-day behavioral and emotional withdrawal during mother-child interactions; and (2) distressing social interactions with co-workers and supervisors were associated with a same-day behavioral withdrawal during mother-child interactions. A third hypothesis--that distressing social interaction at work would be associated with increases in either mothers' reports of aversiveness of mother-child interactions or with observers' reports of maternal impatience--was not supported. (HTH)

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The Effects of Daily Stress at Work on Mother-Child Interaction

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Introduction and Method

This study focuses on a mother's employment situation as an important aspect of daily life that may influence day-to-day changes in parent-child interaction. Thirty mother-child dyads, recruited through four worksite childcare centers, were studied for five consecutive days (Mon-Fri). Target children were preschoolers (3-5 years old) enrolled full-time in the childcare program. The typical mother in this study was an ethnic-minority single parent.

At the end of each day at work, before being reunited with their children, mothers completed subjective measures of two daily job stressors: workload (5 items, alpha = .87) and negative interactions with coworkers and supervisors (32 items, alpha = .86). Later at home, before going to bed, mothers completed two scales describing interactions with the target child that took place after work: aversive interaction (9 items, alpha = .83) and maternal withdrawal (14 items, alpha = .90). In addition, the 13 dyads at one of the sites were videotaped during 10-minute free-play periods at the parent-child reunion each evening. A reliable minute-by-minute coding system was developed with: (a) eight indicators of the parent's positive emotional and behavioral involvement with the child (see Table 1), and (b) one measure of parental impatience.

Results

Multiple regression (MR) analyses tested three hypotheses, which were based on an earlier study of male air traffic controllers (Repetti, 1994). The same MR model used in that study was used here to predict day-to-day changes in mother-child interaction from daily changes in perceived job stressors. Results based on maternal self-reports are summarized in Table 2.

The first hypothesis was supported in the MR analyses: *daily increases in perceived workload were associated with a same-day behavioral and emotional withdrawal during mother-child interactions.* Significant findings from the MR analyses are illustrated here by (1) identifying each mother's two highest and her two lowest workload days during the week of data collection, and (2) averaging parent withdrawal scores (based on maternal self-reports or observer ratings) on the two sets of days. There was a high average maternal rating of withdrawal on the high workload days (mean = .21), compared to the low workload days (mean = -.19). Figure 1, which illustrates the significant findings based on the behavioral observations, shows low average ratings of parental attention, speaking, caring, and loving on the relatively high workload days[1].

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The second hypothesis was also supported in the MR analyses: *distressing social interactions with coworkers and supervisors were associated with a same-day behavioral withdrawal during mother-child interactions*. There was a high average maternal rating of withdrawal on the days when mothers reported more distressing interactions (mean = .07), compared to days when there were less distressing social events at work (mean = -.11). As illustrated in Figure 2, reports of more negative social interactions at work were significantly associated with two observer ratings of maternal involvement. Mothers spoke less and made fewer expressions of affection on the relatively high social stress days.

The third hypothesis was not supported: distressing social interactions at work were not associated with increases in either the mothers' daily reports of the aversiveness of mother-child interactions, nor in the observers' ratings of maternal impatience during the daily mother-child play sessions.

Discussion

This study suggests that mothers' interactions with their preschool-age children may be marked by fewer signs of emotional and behavioral involvement on days when they have distressing interactions with coworkers and supervisors, and when the amount and pace of their workload increases. There was no evidence for a spillover of negative affect from work to home on days when mothers were upset from distressing social events at work.

Two of the main findings from a study of middle-class fathers (who were all employed as air traffic controllers) were replicated in this sample of primarily low-income mothers (Repetti, 1994). This study included two important methodological improvements. First, by separating the parents' ratings of conditions at work from their descriptions of their later behavior at home, we eliminated the possibility that parent-child interactions could have influenced parent ratings of events earlier at work. Second, by videotaping the parent-child reunion at the end of the mother's workday, we tested whether the previously reported findings were dependent upon the use of parents' perceptions to assess parent-child interactions.

Reference

Repetti, R. L. (1994). Short-term and long-term processes linking job stressors to father -child interaction. Social Development, 3(1), 1-15.

Footnote

[1]One significant MR result, which was opposite to the predicted direction, indicated that the raters observed more specific communications of approval on higher workload days (eg., statements like "wow" or "good job"). The mean score for maternal expressions of approval on the two highest and the two lowest workload days were similar (.00 versus .01). An increase in positive statements of approval (despite an overall reduction in speech) may reflect an attempt by an otherwise withdrawn mother to compensate for her apparent fatigue and weariness. On highly demanding days, mothers may have sensed that they were less able to be caring and loving (as was noted by the coders), and were spouting approving words in an effort to counteract that impression.

Table 1

Codes for Maternal Behavior During the Daily Parent-Child Reunion

Mother's Positive Behavioral Involvement
*Amount of maternal speaking
*Degree to which mother's attention was focused on the child
*Degree to which mother was actively engaged in an activity with the child
*Instances of maternal teaching or explaining
Mother's Positive Emotional Involvement
*Verbal or physical expressions of affection
*Degree to which mother appeared caring
*Degree to which mother appeared loving
*Maternal communications of approval

Table 2

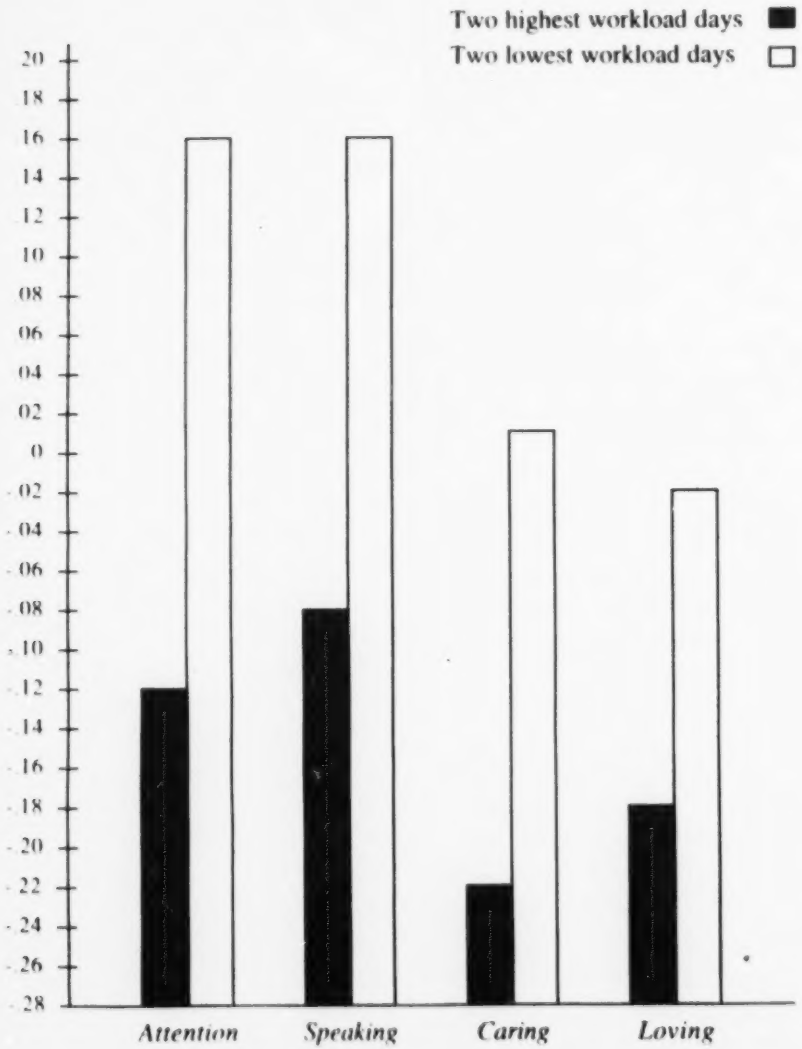
Results of Two Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting
Daily Self-Reported Maternal Withdrawal From Daily Perceived Job Stressors

Daily Job Stress Predictor Variable	Beta
Model A	
Perceived Workload	.22 ($p \leq .05$)
Model B	
Distressing Social Interactions	.32 ($p \leq .0001$)

Note. The regression model controls for all between-subjects variance (effects and errors) through a series of dummy variables, one for each subject. Thus, each mother's baseline levels or five-day averages on the predictor and outcome variables were controlled before examining the association between a job stressor and a measure of maternal behavior on the same day.

Figure 1

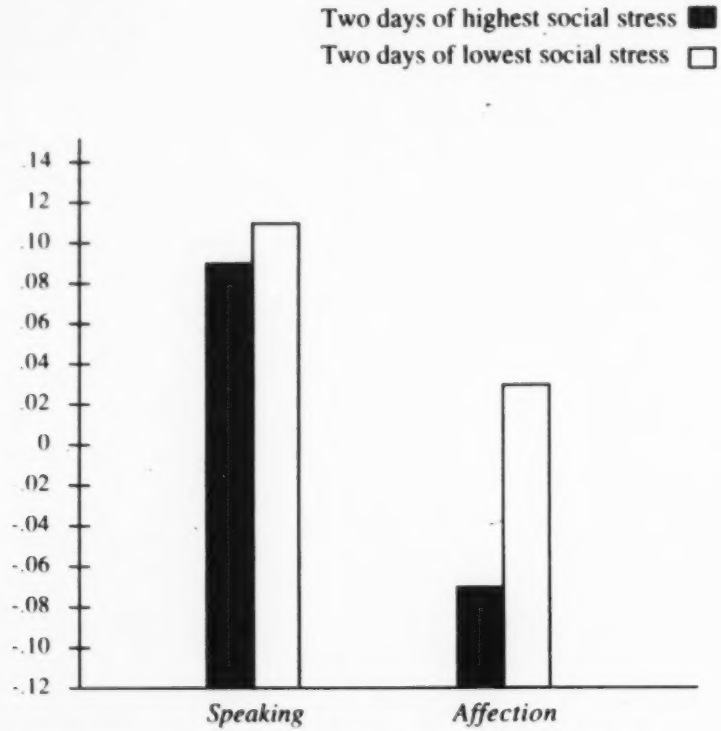
Average Observer Ratings of Parent Behavior on High and Low *Perceived Workload* Days



Note. Ratings were standardized to $\overline{X} = 0$, SD = 1.

Figure 2

Average Observer Ratings of Parent Behavior on High and Low *Social Stress* Days



Note. Ratings were standardized to $\overline{X} = 0$, SD = 1.